

MEDICINE and GOSPEL: the Right Relationship

Faith, Pills, Miracles, Scripture, Remission, Doctors, Church, Cure, Wholeness

PART I – FAITH AND HEALING

Whenever there is any sort of growth in the Church’s Ministry of Healing – whether it is experienced locally or elsewhere – there arises the question of its relation to medicine.

The early Pentecostalist churches, for instance, when they rediscovered the miraculous and dramatic elements of God’s healing, tended to play down medicine. Some went so far as to imply that medicine is merely a human crutch for those whose faith is not strong enough to walk this life without it!

FAITH

If you had faith God would heal you, they said; if you did not have it then he couldn’t – and you’d have to rely on man: such was their message.

It was a serious error, and although there has been a deepening and a development in the Church’s Ministry of Healing, this sort of thinking still persists – fuelled usually by American literature, cassettes or itinerant ministries which are not Pentecostalist at all, in the denominational sense.

There are some who still teach – or imply – that the measure of your faith is seen in your readiness to throw away your pills!

There is no space here to pursue the right place of faith in healing; I have done this in the (PJR) pamphlet **Faith & Healing** in this series.

God uses our faith, but we must avoid the view that our faith can use God! Faith results in our having the grace to obey God; it does not force God to obey us.

‘If you have faith you will be healed’ is, as generally understood, quite unBiblical and can be pastorally disastrous. When those with ‘faith’ do not receive the healing they feel they have been promised their last state is often worse than their first, since, in addition to their ailment, the so-called ‘healing’ ministry which they have received adds *guilt* to their suffering.

GLASSES and STICKS!

I know one well-known Christian leader who went through a great personal trauma when he realised that he had to wear glasses! He felt that there would be a discrepancy between what his hearers heard him teach, and what they saw! This shows the extent to which this sort of teaching can reach. The minister now wears glasses, and having faced something of the pain and paradox his teaching will no doubt have a little more depth and a little less popularity (since half-truths are always popular).

PART II - GOD'S PLACE IN THE NORMAL

GOD'S NORMAL WORKING

SMILE PLEASE!

It has always seemed to me that our attitude to dentistry highlights all the issues which are the subjects of this article.

Those who advocate the ‘if-you-have-faith-you’ll-be-healed’ teaching are likely to be inconsistent when it comes to their teeth.

Such beliefs should result in the Christians of faith assuming that God would heal their teeth, either by miraculous extractions or ‘stoppings’ or by rendering both remedies unnecessary!

In practice, few, if any, take such a position in regard to teeth, even if they tend to do so in relation to headaches, backaches, stomach-aches, and the ailments of others.

UNDERSTANDING

The reason is because most of us have a deep understanding of dental health and are reminded very regularly of it. We know that in large measure it depends on our discipline; we know that we suffer when we ill-treat teeth. They are *not* long-suffering, but complain bitterly the moment anything is wrong! However much we dislike experiencing dentistry, we know, understand and appreciate the dentist’s work.

Most Christians will *not* regard teeth as God’s no-go area, but rather will expect and experience his grace and wisdom to help them treat their teeth well, and give them greater peace if, by nature, dentistry frightens them. Christians will probably pray for the dentist to be God’s instrument (no pun intended!) of healing for themselves and others.

God, if they were asked to ‘locate’ him, would be envisaged as somehow ‘*within*’ the whole thing rather than distant from it.

The health and wholeness of our teeth is closely linked to our choices and our habits; to our discipline - or our lack of it!

GETTING IT RIGHT

If I have dwelt on dentistry it is because it is in this area that the overwhelming majority of Christians have found for themselves the right and normal relationship between faith and medicine. When they suffer toothache they recognise when it is their own fault, and regard dentistry as (in the most literal sense) a Godsend.

When we place God ‘within’ something, we affirm that God is normally in the normal. This is extremely important and it is the message both of Christmas and of the Cross.

God is not to be ‘located’ in the abnormal and the supernatural; that is where the pagans place him.

SIGNS & WONDERS

If and when we discover that God works miraculously, then we have learned another important thing about him.

There is, however, a trap. If we then *focus* on the ‘**signs and wonders**’ we tend mentally to ‘locate’ God just in the *extra*-ordinary, the *super*-natural and the *ab*-normal.

(I have written ‘locate’ in inverted commas since it is a mental, not a geographical, placing.)

If we make the error of 'locating' God primarily in the extra-ordinary, then the ordinary, the natural and the normal can then seem to be spiritually desolate and devoid of God. This is Bad News not Good News! It denies the Creation and the Incarnation, and undermines any conviction that God might use bread, wine, water, oil, touch or word to communicate himself to us.

This is the danger inherent in signs and wonders and why we are discouraged from seeking them. It is right that ‘signs’ should follow *believers*, but when believers identify God exclusively with them, then it is that believers start following the *signs*!

NORMALLY SPEAKING

God’s hand can indeed be seen in signs and wonders – over forty years ago my own crippled mother was instantly healed when she was anointed. But the Good News of the Gospel is not that God reveals himself primarily in the *extra*-ordinary, but has chosen to step into his Creation and work within it.

GOSPEL AND MEDICINE

All this about ‘locating’ God (not a terribly good word, but I cannot think of a better) goes right to the heart of Christian thinking about Gospel and Medicine.

In short, if God is ‘located’ in the extra-ordinary then his healing will not be recognised in the ordinary, and *medicine will be suspect.*

If, on the other hand, God is ‘located’ within the natural then his hand will be seen within it and *medicine will be affirmed and valued.*

OVERFLOWING THE NORMAL

I must be careful not to be misunderstood. To ‘locate’ God in the ordinary, the natural and the normal is not to deny his activity beyond these categories – the extra-ordinary, etc. It means, rather, that God is seen to be so great as, on occasions, to overflow the normal. Christians who affirm him in the normal can more safely rejoice when they discern his hand in the abnormal, because their faith is rooted and grounded in reality.

TWO ERRORS

When God is only seen in the abnormal, then history shows that this is a recipe for fringe extremism and imbalance, for distortion and for heresy.

But error is possible on both sides. God can be so located in the ‘normal’ that he is boxed-in by our thinking and the possibility of his acting in any way beyond our present comprehension is denied. He cannot act miraculously some folk insist, when it is really that their thinking cannot cope with miracles!

PART III – MEDICINE IN SCRIPTURE

If what I have written so far is basically true, we would expect to find in Scripture an affirmation of medicine.

OLD TESTAMENT

In the **Old Testament** at least eleven different aids to healing are mentioned: food, wine, water, salts, soda, soap, oil, balm (sedative), fruit, leaves and bandages.

Food and Eating - Psalm 103:2-5, Psalm 104:14

Wine and Drinking - Psalm 104:15

Water and Washing - Exodus 15:23 and following, 2 Kings 5:10

Salt for Sterilising - 2 Kings 2:19-22

Soda for Washing - Jeremiah 2:22

Soap for Washing - Jeremiah 2:22

Oil for Cleansing - Psalm 23:5 (see also Matthew 6:17)

Balm probably as a Sedative - Jeremiah 8:22, 46:11, 51:8, Genesis 37:25, 43:11, Ezekiel 27:17

Figs for Poultice - Isaiah 38:21

Leaves for Healing - Ezekiel 47:12

Bandages - Isaiah 1:6

The attitude to physicians preceding the birth of Christ could be very positive and can be seen in Ecclesiasticus 38:1 1-15.

Honour physicians for their services, for the Lord created them; (verse 1)

By them [the Lord's works] *the physician heals and takes away pain;* (verse 7)

My child, when you are ill, do not delay,

but pray to the Lord, and he will heal you. (verse 9)

NEW TESTAMENT

- **Christ** did not just magically dispense miracles.
- He is recorded as preparing for ministry, eg. avoiding crowds, getting the right team around him or asking about the illness.

Avoided crowds:

He took him aside privately because of the crowd [Mark 7:33]

He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village. [Mark 8:23]

Getting the right team around him:

Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. [Mark 5:40]

Asking about the duration of the illness:

Jesus asked the father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' [Mark 9:21]

- He often questioned the sufferers about themselves, their hopes and their expectations.

Asking questions about the sufferers,

Then Jesus asked him, 'What is your name?'

He replied, 'My name is Legion; for we are many.'[Mark 5:9]

Then Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' [Mark 10:51]

When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?' [John 5:6]

Asking about their hopes & expectations.

When he entered the house, the blind men came to him; and Jesus said to them, 'Do you believe that I am able to do this?' [Matthew 9:28]

- He used not simply words, but natural **means** like spittle, mud, or touch and suggested water or food.

Jesus used spittle:

...and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid hands on him... [Mark 8:23]

Jesus used mud:

When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes,... [John 9:6]

Jesus used touch:

...all those who had any who were sick with various kinds of diseases brought them to him; and he laid hands on them and cured them. [Luke 4.40]

And he touched his ear and healed him[Malchus]. [Luke 22:51]

[For much fuller details see the article on this site –

'Laying on of Hands in Healing' Part I, Section 3 'Our Lord's Practice']

The use of water:

'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. [John 9:7]

The need of food:

...and told them to give her [Jairus's daughter] something to eat. [Mark 5:43]

In his parable of the Good Samaritan (which for centuries has linked Church and Medicine) he affirms the use of antiseptic (wine), emollient (oil) and bandages, to say nothing of free transport, subsidised shelter, rest, food and care!

He went to him and bandaged his wounds

having poured oil and wine on them.

Then he put him on his own animal,

brought him to an inn,

and took care of him.

The next day he took out two denarii,

gave them to the innkeeper, and said,

"Take care of him; and when I come back,

I will repay you whatever more you spend." [Luke 10:34-35]

- His ministry was not always instant in its results, and he is recorded as ministering more than once.

Results not always instant and ministering more than once:

He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he put

saliva on his eyes and laid hands on him, he asked him, 'Can you see anything?'

And the man looked up and said, 'I see people, but they look like trees, walking.'

Then Jesus laid hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored,...[Mark 8:23-25]

The original Greek in the story of Jesus and Legion, translated '**For he had said to him'** suggests that Jesus had been addressing the demoniac for some time. [Mark 5:8.]

- He often used his authority to give guidance about maintaining the healing received, and is recorded as engaging in follow-up.

Giving guidance about the healing and/or maintaining it:

[Healing of the Leper] **After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, 'See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded as a testimony to them'**

[Mark 1:43- 44]

[Healing of the Paralytic] **'I say to you, stand up, take up your mat, and go to your home.'** [Mark 2:11]

[The deliverance of Legion] **'Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.'** [Mark 5:19]

[The Raising of Jairus's daughter] **He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.** [Mark 5:43]

[The Healing of the Deaf Mute] **Jesus ordered them to tell no one; ...** [Mark 7:36]

[The Healing of the Blind Man of Bethsaida] **Then he sent him away to his home, saying, "Do not even go into the village.'** [Mark 8:26]

[The Ten Lepers] **'Go and show yourselves to the priests.'** And as they went they were made clean. [Luke 17:14]

Engaging in follow-up:

Later, Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, 'See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more , so that nothing worse happens to you.' [John 5:14]

- He was happy to apply a saying about doctors to himself as **Dr. Luke** records. Luke was a doctor [Colossians 4:14] and records Christ identifying closely with the term twice.
 1. **He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor**, cure yourself!'** [Luke 4:23]
 2. **Jesus answered, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician**, but those who are sick. I am come to call not righteous to repentance but sinners.**
[Luke 5:31]

Although the translation of the NRSV uses **doctor and **physician** they translate the same Greek word. (The New International Version also uses the same two words in translation – but the other way around!)

- The disciples' use of oil met with his approval even if it was not based on his example. (Since 'Christ' *was* God's Anointed One he had no need to symbolise himself.)
He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over unclean spirits...
They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them. [Mark 6:7 and 13]

[See also the article on this site "Anointing with Oil - in the Bible and Today"]

- Luke was valued by **Paul**. (We would have no accounts of the Apostolic Church and Pentecost had Paul's doctor-friend not recorded them for us!)
Luke, the beloved physician [Colossians 4:14]
...Demas and Luke, my fellow-workers. [Philemon 24]
Demas in love with this present world, has deserted me... Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. [2 Timothy 4:10-11]
Luke is widely regarded as the author of the Acts of the Apostles, and that some 'we-' passages describe times when they were together, e.g. at Malta:
After this happened [the healing of Publius's father], the rest of the people of the island who had diseases also came and were cured. They bestowed many honours on us...[Acts 28:9-10]
- Paul gives good medical advice to the frequently-ill Timothy.
No longer drink only water, but take a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments. [1 Timothy 5:23]

- The Spirit’s ‘gift of healing’ is correctly translated ‘gifts of healings’ or ‘gifts of cures’. It has a medical slant to it.

We tend to assume that the St.Paul's well known mention of the '**gift of healing**' [1 Corinthians 12:9, 28 & 30] automatically refers to *spiritual* ministries. It includes them but is not likely to be exclusively spiritual.

 1. The phrase is a double plural – **gifts of healings** – which suggests a wide variety. (This double-plural is rarely translated literally, but it appeared in the Revised Version and has been taken up in the New King James' Version.)
 2. The Greek word translated **healing(s)** is the verb related to the noun, '*doctor*'. Our word *Geriatric* comes from two Greek words *Geras* old age, and *Iatros* a doctor. Luke was a *Iatros* and it was the word translated **physician/doctor** in section 7 above. St. Paul's use of the word for **gifts of healings** is the verb related to doctoring [Gk. *iaomai*].
Luke, a doctor, uses it 12 times in his Gospel, Mark only once.
- **James** teaches about the use of oil when praying for the sick – see the article on this website “**Anointing with Oil – in the Bible and Today**”.

They [i.e. the sick] should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. [James 5:14]

I believe that the context shows that this is primarily a reference to spiritual ministry, but it is probably un-Biblical to place the spiritual and the medical in watertight compartments.
- In Revelation, **John** looks forward to the time when the leaves of the trees will be for the healing of nations.

On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit...and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. [Revelation 22:2]
- There are no Scriptural texts which suggest that spiritual growth should be marked by despising medicine.

In the Old Testament we read of King Asa ...**he was diseased in his feet and his disease became severe; yet even in his disease he did not seek the Lord, but sought help from physicians.** [2 Chronicles 16:12] In the context of chapters 15-16 his sin was not in turning to physicians but in failing to keep his covenant to seek God first.

In the New Testament, the woman in the crowd who comes to Jesus is described as having **suffered from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse.** [Mark 5:26]

Mark's purpose in telling this was to indicate how hopeless her state was before she met with Jesus. He is not teaching that Christians should shun medicine.

[Interestingly when Luke retells Mark's story, his loyalty to his profession leads him to drop the words **she had endured much of many physicians.**(!) See Luke 8:43.]

Then, as now, there were the **unhealed**, even when Church and Medicine worked together:

- It was at Malta, where Paul and Luke ministered to the sick of the island, that Trophimus was left sick.

Trophimus I left ill at Miletus (i.e. Malta) [2 Timothy 4:20]

- Paul’s own ‘thorn’ was not removed while it was being used to break his pride.
Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.
[2 Corinthians 12:7-9]
- We owe the Epistle to the Philippians to the near-fatal illness of Epaphroditus.
See Philippians 2:25-30
**He was indeed so ill that he nearly died. But God had mercy on him... [v.27]
...he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for those services that you could not give me. [v.30]**
- Although Paul commended the faith of Timothy it did not free him from illness.
No longer drink only water, but take a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments. [1 Timothy 5:23]

THE WORD AND THE MESSENGER

In John 5 we read an account of a visit Jesus made to the Bethesda Spa at Jerusalem. It has been described as a ‘first century hospital’ because it was always crowded with the blind, the lame and the paralysed.

Jesus goes to a lame¹ man who had not been able to avail himself of the water’s therapy for nearly forty years (whether because he had tried and failed, or because deep down he had given up any desire for healing). Jesus heals him but later follows up his ministry with further encouragement and advice, and apparently leaves the rest.

¹ Today it is fashionable to avoid using words like 'lame' since a non-representative minority decree that they are 'offensive'.

Language is a tool, to have simple short words like 'deaf', 'dumb', 'blind', 'lame' makes language efficient and clear. *'Hear him ye deaf, him praise ye dumb, etc...*

To have to beat-around-the-bush under some obligation to avoid such words at all costs, makes language inefficient. My mother was a 'cripple' before her healing, and she has always so described herself. I am not aware that that ever offended anybody!

If a minority use some words in an offensive way, I am not at all sure that the solution lies in the majority feeling forced to ditch them altogether.

It is certainly worth trying to get the majority to set an example and show that such words need not be used offensively, for there is nothing in the words themselves that is offensive.

For further thoughts see the article “Politically Correct – Our Friend Or Foe?”

We might ask, ‘Why did Jesus not stay and minister to the rest?’

St. John gives us the reason –

‘In these lay many invalids - blind, lame, and paralysed - waiting for the stirring of the water, for an **angel of the Lord** went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred up the water;...’

[John 5:3]

The truth of this account lies not in whether the ‘Angel’ could have been recorded on videotape or not; the truth lies in the author’s great theological affirmation that it was ultimately the Lord God who was at work behind the healing properties of the pool.

(The fact that some manuscripts omit this, points towards its authenticity, since difficulties are usually eased in transmission rather than invented!)

The writer is saying that, at the Pool, the healing work of the Lord God was active –

- a) **through his Son,**
- b) **through his Creation.**

The departure of Jesus did not leave the rest without God’s healing. God’s healing was available to them. In fact his choice of ministry to just the one man was to make God’s healing available to the one who, in modern terms, had the prescription but never seemed able to get to the chemist!

To return to our earlier themes; the teaching is that God is active in nature as well as super-naturally; within the normal as well as ab-normally; within the ordinary as well as in the extra-ordinary.

PART IV – GOD’S HEALING MINISTRY AND MEDICINE

GOD’S HEALING WORKS

Christians believe in –

- God the Father who made the world,
- God the Son who redeemed mankind,
- God the Holy Spirit who sanctifies the people of God.

This short creed shows three related but different activities of God –

- (a) Making and sustaining the world: ‘CREATION’
- (b) Rescuing and saving us: ‘REDEMPTION’
- (c) Making Christ’s followers Christ-like: ‘SANCTIFICATION’

The Healing Ministry of Medicine is closely linked to (a), while the Healing Ministry of the Church is closely linked to (b) and (c).

Medicine is a human discipline based on a scientific understanding of God’s healing laws in nature (the so-called ‘Laws of Nature’).

It is not necessary (however desirable) for a doctor to acknowledge the divine source of these laws, any more than an X-ray specialist need know the source of the rays he/she uses. The primary task of the medic is so to know the rules that he is able to apply them to maximum healing advantage.

- Medicine primarily applies the lessons revealed in Creation;
- The Church primarily applies the lessons revealed in Redemption and Sanctification.

Since medicine is co-operation with and understanding Divine Laws, so the term ‘divine healing’ has, by and large, been rejected as a description of the Church’s ministry, lest it imply that Creation is not God’s sphere of working, or that God’s activity is limited to the Church!

Unlike Medicine, the Church's *distinctive* ministry is not repair prior to eternal death, but rescue prior to eternal life!

Medicine's ministry says much about our roots and what we are growing away from; the Church's distinctive ministry has much to do with our destiny and what we are growing into.

Medicine may fulfil its goals here because it is of Creation and this life. The Church's distinctive ministry has Redemption as its goal of which only the first-fruits are tasted here. [Romans 8:22] That is partly why the Church's healing ministry always continues to have the mystery and pain of the Cross within it.

SOUP, SOAP, SALVATION

General Booth's dictum reminds us not to 'locate' God in the super-spiritual. The 'social' and 'spiritual' Gospels are not alternatives but facets of the one Good News.

When Christians under-value Creation it is likely to arise from their 'Forgotten Father' syndrome.

The British Medical Association has said –

‘As man is body, mind and spirit, and health depends on the harmonious functioning of the whole man, so the task of medicine and the church is inseparable; co-operation thus comes into line with Christ's charge to his disciples to heal and preach.’

We are 'body, mind, and spirit' but they cannot be divided like the shell, white and yolk of an egg.

When Christ was once confronted with a lame man he viewed him both medically and spiritually, and knew that for his healing he needed the forgiveness of sins as well as the ability to walk.

Wholeness is the blossoming of our creation, our redemption and our sanctification: and heaven is the goal of all.

REMISSION

This is the medical term for when the symptoms of illness disappear for a while, although the person remains ill. Pain killers are to give the relief of a 'remission'. Excitement or concentration can sometimes give a temporary remission of pain.

When the symptoms do not return, *then* it is a real cure/healing.

This distinction should be used by Christians. A remission is a great blessing for which we can thank God. To call it a 'cure' before a permanent relief has been experienced often leads to dishonouring God, alienating the medical profession, and bringing disappointment to the sufferer.

Time will tell. Wait and see, so that you honour God by affirming what he *has* done rather than dishonour him by claiming what he has not done!

DEATH

There is a sense in which even the greatest miracle of healing – e.g. the raising of Lazarus – is little more than a ‘remission’, for every healing has to give way to death.

It is death which enables us to see most clearly the roles of Medicine and Church, for our view of Life depends on our view of death.

Death is the fulfilment of our Creation, of our Redemption and of our Sanctification. As Charles Wesley wrote -

**Finish then thy new creation:
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see thy great salvation,
Perfectly restored in thee;
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love and praise.**